

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

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Covenant & Conversation

In September 2010, BBC, Reuters and other news agencies reported on a sensational scientific discovery. Researchers at US National Center for Atmospheric Research and the University of Colorado have shown through computer simulation how the division of the red sea may have taken place.

By sophisticated modelling, they've demonstrated how a strong east wind, blowing overnight, could have pushed water back at a bend where an ancient river is believed to have merged with a coastal lagoon. 63mph winds from the east could have pushed the water back at an ancient river bend. The water would have been pushed back into the two waterways, and a land bridge would have opened at the bend, allowing people to walk across the exposed mud flats. As soon as the wind died down, the waters would have rushed back in. As the leader of the project said when the report was published: "The simulations match fairly closely with the account in Exodus."

So we now have scientific evidence to support the biblical account, though to be fair, a very similar case was made some years ago by Colin Humphreys, Professor of Materials Science at Cambridge University, and Professor of Experimental Physics at the Royal Institution in London, in his book *The Miracles of Exodus*.

To me, though, the real issue is what the biblical account actually is. Because it is just here that we have one of the most fascinating features of the way the Torah tells its stories. Here is the key passage:

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. (Ex. 14: 21-22)

The passage can be read two ways. The first is that what happened was a suspension of the laws of nature. It was a supernatural event. The waters stood, literally, like a wall.

As you read these divrei torah
please keep in mind
Esther Nechama bas Sorah Leah
for a speedy recovery

The second is that what happened was miraculous not because the laws of nature were suspended. To the contrary, as the computer simulation shows, the exposure of dry land at a particular point in the Red Sea was a natural outcome of the strong east wind. What made it miraculous is that it happened just there, just then, when the Israelites seemed trapped, unable to go forward because of the sea, unable to turn back because of the Egyptian army pursuing them.

There is a significant difference between these two interpretations. The first appeals to our sense of wonder. How extraordinary that the laws of nature should be suspended to allow an escaping people to go free. It is a story to appeal to the imagination of a child.

But the naturalistic explanation is wondrous at another level entirely. Here the Torah is using the device of irony. What made the Egyptians of the time of Ramses so formidable was the fact that they possessed the latest and most powerful form of military technology, the horse drawn chariot. It made them unbeatable in battle, and fearsome.

What happens at the sea is poetic justice of the most exquisite kind. There is only one circumstance in which a group of people travelling by foot can escape a highly trained army of charioteers, namely when the route passes through a muddy sea bed. The people can walk across, but the chariot wheels get stuck in the mud. The Egyptian army can neither advance nor retreat. The wind drops. The water returns. The powerful are now powerless, while the powerless have made their way to freedom.

This second narrative has a moral depth that the first does not; and it resonates with the message of the book of Psalms:

His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his delight in the legs of the warrior;
the Lord delights in those who fear him,
who put their hope in his unfailing love.
(Psalm 147: 10-11)

The elegantly simple way in which the division of the red sea is described in the Torah so that it can be read at two quite different levels, one as a supernatural miracle, the other as a moral tale about the limits of technology when it comes to the real strength of nations: that to me is what is most striking. It is a text quite deliberately written so that our understanding of it can deepen as we mature, and we are no longer so interested in the mechanics of miracles, and more interested in how freedom is won or lost.

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So it's good to know how the division of the sea happened, but there remains a depth to the biblical story that can never be exhausted by computer simulations and other historical or scientific evidence, and depends instead on being sensitive to its deliberate and delicate ambiguity. Just as ruach, a physical wind, can part waters and expose land beneath, so ruach, the human spirit, can expose, beneath the surface of a story, a deeper meaning beneath.

The beginning of a new year tends to be a time for predictions. Have you peered into the crystal ball, read the runes, consulted the astrologists and listened to the soothsayers? Good. Then you know what's going to happen. My prediction, which I make with total confidence, is that total confidence in predictions is never warranted. They turn out, more often than not, to be wrong.

Here are some of my favourites. "Heavier-than-air flying machines are impossible," said Lord Kelvin, president of the Royal Society in 1895. "There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home," said Ken Olson, president and founder of Digital Equipment, a maker of mainframes, in 1977.

"Everything that can be invented has been invented," said an official at the US patent office in 1899. And Charles Darwin wrote in the foreword to *The Origin of Species*, "I see no good reasons why the views given in this volume should shock the religious sensibilities of anyone."

Despite the many political experts, research institutes, think tanks, government and university departments, no one foresaw the bloodless end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Few foresaw the possibility of a terrorist attack like 9/11, that changed our world.

I was once present at a gathering where Bernard Lewis, the scholar of Islam, was asked to predict the outcome of a certain American foreign policy intervention. He gave a magnificent reply. "I am a historian, so I only make predictions about the past. What is more, I am a retired historian, so even my past is passé."

We know so much at a macro- and micro-level. We look up and see a universe of a hundred billion galaxies each of a hundred billion stars. We look down and see a human body containing a hundred trillion cells, each with a double copy of the human genome,

3.1 billion letters long, enough if transcribed to fill a library of 5,000 books.

There remains one thing we do not know and will never know: What tomorrow will bring. The past, said L. P. Hartley, is a foreign country. But the future is an undiscovered one. That is why predictions so often fail. They don't even come close.

Why, when even the ancient Mesopotamians could make accurate predictions about the movement of planets, are we, with all our brain-scans and neuroscience, not able to predict what people will do? Why do they so often take us by surprise?

The reason is that we are free. We choose, we make mistakes, we learn. People constantly surprise us. The failure at school becomes the winner of a Nobel Prize. The leader who disappointed, suddenly shows courage and wisdom in a crisis. The driven businessman has an intimation of mortality and decides to devote the rest of his life to helping the poor.

This is something science has not yet explained and perhaps never will. There are scientists who believe freedom is an illusion. But it isn't. It's what makes us human.

We are free because we are not merely objects. We are subjects. We respond not just to physical events but to the way we perceive those events. We have minds, not just brains. We have thoughts, not just sensations. We react but we can also choose not to react. There is something about us that is irreducible to material, physical causes and effects.

I personally believe that the way our ancestors spoke about this remains true and profound. We are free because G-d is free and He made us in His image. That is what is meant by the three words G-d tells Moses at the burning bush when he asks G-d what is His name. G-d replies, Ehyeh asher Ehyeh. These are often translated as "I am what I am." What they really mean, though, is "I will be who and how I choose to be." I am the G-d of freedom. I cannot be predicted. Note that G-d says this at the start of Moses' mission to lead a people from slavery to freedom.

There is something about the human person that will always elude scientific analysis. Our future is unpredictable because it is made by us and we are free. So I urge you to do one totally unpredictable act of kindness in the next twenty-four hours and show someone that the world is a little better than they thought it was going to be. ©2010 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

After the Jews made it across the sea, this week's Parsha (Beshalach) introduces the Jews singing in joy. Moshe sang with the men (15:1), and then Miriam sang with the women (15:21). Both of them sang, while the people responded. However, when

Miriam sang, the Passuk (verse) says that she responded to "them" in masculine form. If she sang with the women, why is the word in masculine form? Also, of all the verses that Miriam chose to repeat of Moshe's song, she chose this: "sing to G-d because He's great; horse and wagon drowned in the sea". Why did she choose this seemingly random verse?

To understand this, we must ask ourselves why the horses drowned, if only their riders had sinned? Rav Chashin tells of a much deeper exchange between Moshe and Miriam: After Moshe sang with the men, Miriam responded to MOSHE by telling him that the horses were punished just like the soldiers on the backs because they facilitated those soldiers. By the same token, Miriam is telling Moshe that the women deserve just as much credit as the men, regardless of their potential difference in familial roles. Miriam's message couldn't be more true today: Helping someone follow the Torah's laws is as important as personally following the Torah's laws. If we all try our best to follow the Torah's laws, and help others do the same, we'll all sing together, in harmony. ©2010 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

“**W**here is G-d?” asked Menahem Mendel of Kotzk, one of the great Hasidic masters. “Everywhere,” replied his students. “No, my children,” he responded, “G-d is not everywhere, but only where you let Him enter.”

The Kotzker's answer reinforces a distinction that Rabbi Aaron Soloveitchik makes between two terms of redemption—both relate to being saved—hatzalah and yeshuah. Hatzalah requires no action on the part of the person being saved. Yeshuah, on the other hand, is the process whereby the recipient of salvation participates in helping him or herself.

In the portions read during the last few weeks, the Torah describes how the Jewish people, emerging from Egypt, experienced the process of hatzalah. Note G-d's words—ve-hitzalti etchem. (Exodus 6:6) G-d and G-d alone, says the Hagadah, took us out of Egypt. Just as a newborn is protected by her or his parents, so were the newly born Jewish people protected by G-d.

Much like a child who grows up, the Jewish people, having left Egypt, were expected to assume responsibilities. While Moshe thought that the process of hatzalah would be extended into the future, G-d does not concur—the sea will split, but you will be saved only if you do your share and try to cross on your own. (Rashi on Exodus 14:15) As the Jews stand by the sea, the Torah suddenly shifts from the language of hatzalah to that of yeshuah as it states va-yosha Hashem. (Exodus 14:30)

I remember my son Dov, as a small child at the Seder table, asking: “Why do we have to open the door

for Eliyahu (Elijah) the prophet? He has so much power! He gets around so quickly and drinks a lot. Couldn't he squeeze through the cracks?”

At the Seder table, in addition to re-enacting the redemption from Egypt we also stress the hope for future redemption. This part of the Seder experience begins with the welcoming of Eliyahu, who the prophet says, will be the harbinger of the Messianic period. But for the Messiah to come, says Rav Kook, we must do our share and so we open the door and welcome him in. Sitting on our hands and waiting is not enough.

I often asked my parents where their generation was sixty years ago when our people were being murdered and destroyed. Although many stood up, not enough people made their voices heard. Let us bless each other today that when our children and our grandchildren ask us similar questions such as, “Where were you when Jews were mercilessly murdered in Israel?” we will be able to answer that we did stand up and did our best to make a difference.

Let us pray that we will have done our share and opened the door to let G-d in. We must recognize that we can't only ask for hatzalah, where G-d alone intervenes, but we must also do our share to bring about a new era, one of genuine partnership between heaven and earth—a true yeshuah. ©2010 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The great song of Moshe and of Israel forms the centerpiece of this week's parsha. The song was not a one-off historical event. It has remained a part of the morning services of the synagogue prayers of Jews for millennia.

The song concentrates on G-d's power, on Israel's always miraculous survival and on the perfidious behavior of the wicked enemies of the Jewish people. G-d's power and greatness is seen in the salvation of Israel from its enemies, strong as they may be or have been. This song of Moshe forms one of the bookends of the story of the Jewish people.

The other bookend is the second song of Moshe—this time Moshe alone is the performer—in the parsha of Haazinu at the conclusion of the Book of Dvarim. That song also reiterates the theme of this earlier song relating to G-d's power and omnipotence, the survival of the Jewish people against all odds, and the judgments to be rendered against the enemies of the Jewish people.

So the Torah at the beginning of the narrative of Israel's sojourn in the Sinai desert and at the end of that forty year period sings the same song, albeit with different words and melody. But the content and message of the song has remained the same. This can

also be said regarding all of Jewish history-it is the same song that has sustained us for these many generations though the words and melody may no longer be exactly the same throughout this long period of time and through our varied experiences.

Moshe instructs the Jewish people to learn and always remember the song of Haazinu. It is the song of the future redemption of Israel, the song that will light the way for Jews in dark and dangerous times. So why is it that the song that Jews know best, the one that we recite seven times every week of our lives is the first song of Moshe and Israel at the salvation of G-d at Yam Suf?

The lesson here is obvious though often overlooked. The second song of Moshe has little credence if not for the first song at the Yam Suf. Once having experienced miraculous redemption, it is possible to believe firmly that it will happen once more. We are taught in the Torah that in the future redemption "you will be shown wondrous events just as it was in the days of the Exodus from Egypt." That is why the commandments of the Torah, the Shabat itself and all the holidays are classified and named as being a memory aid to the Exodus from Egypt.

Those who cannot remember the past rarely have lasting hope for their future. The song of Moshe and Israel at the Yam Suf validates all later Jewish experiences, goals and hopes. It is a constant reminder of G-d's omnipotence and of His guarantee to us of Jewish survival and ultimate triumph over evil and wickedness. This Shabat is one of "shira"-song-because, again, it validates and confirms all Jewish songs throughout the ages.

The Psalmist teaches us that at the time of the final redemption "then our tongues will be filled with song." The melody and words may be new to us then but the message will certainly be grounded in the teachings of Moshe and Israel in the song of this week's parsha. © 2010 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

The Book of Exodus refers to the G-d of history - "Y-H-V-H," or, "I shall be what I shall be," whereas the Book of Genesis speaks of the G-d of creation - E-I shaddai or E-lohim (Exodus 6:3). What is the difference between these names? Does the G-d of Genesis demand a different kind of fealty than the G-d of Exodus?

The Hebrew word el means power, so the E-lohim of the Book of Genesis is the sum total of all the powers which created and control the cosmos.

As physicist Gerald Schroeder explains in his masterful G-d According to G-d: "We reside on a very

special planet at a very special location within a very special stellar system, formed at just the right position within the right kind of galaxy. The earth's distance from the sun, for the right amount of warmth and its mass and gravity, for the ability to retain a proper atmosphere, put us in the only habitable zone within the solar system."

It was this great Power who set limits to each variable in order to enable intelligent, sentient life to flourish on our planet. And it was this same Power that set limits on human beings, restraining us in accordance with a divine legal code that will eventually produce a global society of compassionate righteousness and moral justice. The Almighty communicated His laws to Noah and Abraham in the splendid and solitary uniqueness of His glory, without the participation of any others. Such is the E-lohim of Genesis.

Not so the Y-H-V-H of Exodus, the G-d that is revealed in the unfolding historical process, He is very different from the G-d revealed at once in the "Big Bang." The G-d of Creation spoke and it came to be, majestically, solitarily. The G-d of Exodus required the cooperation of His covenantal nation Israel; "He will bring about" the redemption, but precisely when and where will depend on Israel, and Israel's willingness to act in accordance with His will. The fruition of His plan will depend on Israel's willingness to be redeemed.

Hence G-d almost begs Moses to accept the leadership of the Israelites. G-d will remain hidden in the cloud; Moses must stand on the front line and be backed up by a willing, inspired and committed nation.

After Moses complains that the Israelites will not listen to him comes a difficult verse: "The Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, and He instructed them regarding the Israelites and regarding Pharaoh the King of Egypt [as to how] to take the children of Israel out of Egypt" (Ex. 6:13). Rashi brilliantly explains, "He commanded them to lead the Jews with sensitive understanding and to have patience with them." After all, the G-d of history entered into a covenant with an entire nation; that nation must be taught and inspired to act in a way that will bring about its redemption.

The plagues were a lesson to the Israelites and the Egyptians that G-d wants His people to be free. This lesson continued with the paschal sacrifice - a sacrifice which represented an act of commitment unto death on the part of the Israelites. And then we come to our wondrous portion, when the Israelites finally reach freedom in the desert. But their happiness is short-lived, soon they hear the Egyptian army approaching from behind while the seemingly impenetrable Reed (Red) Sea lies in front of them

They cry out to Moses in panic; Moses still doesn't seem to understand that G-d's condition for redemption is Israelite action! The prophet then declares: "The Lord will do battle for you, but you must remain silent" (14:14). G-d corrects Moses: "Speak to

the children of Israel and let them start moving [into the sea]" (14:15). Then the first group of Israelites, accepting their role as G-d's partners, jump into the surging waters!

How beautifully does the Vilna Gaon explain the text: "The children of Israel entered the sea, which then became dry land; the waters became for them a protective wall [homa] on their right and on their left" (14:22). The Bible continues, "And the children of Israel went on to the dry land [which had already emerged from the midst of the sea]; and the waters became for them an instrument of anger [hema, without a letter vav] on their right and on their left" (14:29). The Vilna Gaon says this refers to the second group of Israelites, who did not risk their lives but waited for dry land to appear. If we hope to be redeemed, we must first demonstrate that we are worthy of Redemption. © 2010 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd the Children of Israel saw [the frost-like substance] and they said, one to another, 'it is mun,' for they did not know what it was" (Shemos 16:15). There are two basic approaches to understanding this verse. Rav Saadya Gaon, Rashi and Ibn Ezra say that the word "mun" means "prepared food," with the verse telling us that they didn't know exactly what kind of food it was, only that it must be the food Moshe had told them would be there in the morning. Since they were not familiar with it, they simply said to each other "this is the prepared food we were promised." Rashbam, Bechor Shor and Chizkuni say that the word "mun" is an Egyptian form of saying "mah" ("what"), with the nation asking each other "what is it?" The verse then explains why they asked what it was; "for they did not know what it was." [Explaining the verse on a "peshat" level is often inconsistent with how Midrashim explain things on a "derash" level. Nevertheless, the nation using this Egyptian word does not preclude their maintaining their "names, language and clothing" throughout their exile in Egypt, as the linguistic similarity between "mah" and "mun" may have led to this Egyptian word entering the vernacular. Abarbanel (based on Tehilim 61:8) points out that the word "man" (with a patach instead of a kumatz) is also used in Hebrew, but most understand the word there to also mean "appoint" or "prepare," not "what" or "who."]

Ibn Ezra, in both his "long" and "short" commentaries, references a heretic that lived in the time of Rav Saadya Gaon, disproving him. This heretic suggested that the Biblical "mun" was a naturally occurring substance known to exist in the Middle East, a substance called "mun" or "manna" in Arabic (and other native tongues). Although many may also consider the New York Times heretical, last year (6/8/10) they carried an article about an ingredient being

used by some restaurants, referred to as "manna" ("Ancient Manna on Modern Menus," www.nytimes.com/2010/06/09/dining/09manna.html?ref=dining). This substance, originating in the Middle East (with most forms coming from tree sap), is described as being "chewy and crunchy at the same time," providing a "sweet and salty balance." My favorite quote, though, is that "no two people taste manna the same way. [One person] might taste a haunting minty-ness, while [another] might detect a whiff of lemon. No other ingredient is like that."

It would not be strange for G-d's "heavenly bread" to resemble something that occurs naturally, just as He caused the wind to blow before splitting the sea (14:21) even though He could have just as easily split it without the wind. Apparently, G-d greatly prefers to remain as hidden as possible even when performing miracles.

Ibn Ezra proves that the Biblical "mun" can't be what the heretic suggested, as naturally occurring phenomena wouldn't happen every single day, occur only on weekdays but never on Shabbos (every week for close to 40 years), provide the same exact amount for every person, every single day, except every Friday when twice the amount fell for each person, and wouldn't follow them wherever they went for 40 years. Additionally, this naturally occurring substance doesn't melt in the sun, or turn wormy by the next day, or need to be ground before cooking or baking (although this last point seems to fit with the description given in the Times). Therefore, Ibn Ezra concludes, it can't be the "mun" described in the Torah. It is possible, though, that the nation thought it was this substance, and therefore, upon seeing it, referred to it by the name of that naturally occurring substance, "since they did not know what it [really] was." (Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam says something very similar, boruch shekivanti.)

The manner in which we explain this verse impacts how we can explain a textual anomaly (raised by my son's 4th grade class). Although the nation is usually called "the Children of Israel," referred to as such 10 times in the section relating to the "mun," towards the end we are told that "the House of Israel gave it a name- mun" (16:31). Elsewhere (Bamidbar 20:29), Rashi tells us that "House of Israel" refers to "both men and women." There are numerous other instances (e.g. Sh'muel II 1:12 and Melachim I 12:21) where "the House of Israel" refers to the nation's fighting forces, which did not include women. An alternative explanation for "House of Israel" would therefore seem to be "the official institution of Israel," much like the "houses" that G-d gave the Hebrew midwives are explained as "houses of Kehuna, Levi'ya and kingship/government" (see Rashi on 1:21), i.e. the institutions of Kohanim, Levi'im and Kings.

If when they first referred to it as "mun" they meant "prepared food," giving it the official name of

"mun" after becoming familiar with it indicates that they agreed that it was a satisfactory food substance which could sustain them in the desert. This becomes more meaningful if it wasn't just the men that gave it its official name, but also those who prepared it, cooked it, and baked it (see Shemos 16:23 and Bamidbar 11:8). The Torah therefore tells us that it wasn't just the men, as the women also agreed it was worthy of being called "food." [Alternatively, since it was the men ("man to his brother") that first referred to it as "mun," the fact that the women actually agreed with them was worthy of note.☺] From this perspective, the Torah specifically uses the term "House of Israel" in order to tell us that both the men and women agreed that the "mun" qualified as genuine "food."

On the other hand, if they didn't originally know what this substance was, or mistakenly thought it was the naturally occurring "manna," making "mun" its official name cannot be a confirmation of their initial impression. Rather, the slang term that had been used based on not knowing what it was, was subsequently sanctioned by the "House of Israel," added to the national dictionary (as it were), and became its official name. "And the House of Israel called it 'mun,'" either because they originally didn't know what to call it (which was now embedded in its name), or because they originally thought it was the naturally occurring "manna," but retained the name "mun" to signify their recognition that even those things that occur naturally come from G-d.

The Gan (one of the Tosafists) combines two approaches, suggesting that they first called it "mun" because it is the Egyptian word for "what," but kept calling it "mun," which in Hebrew means "prepared," after realizing that it was the prepared food from G-d. It is possible that although most of the nation had wondered "what it was," only some came up with idea to make "mun" its name because of the word's dual meaning. The Torah couldn't use the same term ("Children of Israel") for both, since not all who had started referring to it as "mun" (or asked what it was) were involved in giving it its official name. However, since everyone accepted the name once it was suggested, it was considered the "House of Israel" that gave it the name and added it to the national dictionary.

These approaches all assume that the only name it ever had was "mun," and explain why they first called it "mun," and why that became its official name. Midrash Lekach Tov says that, after they asked what it is, it was called "Lechem Abirim" (heavenly bread, or bread of the mighty, see Tehilim 78:25), until the nation called it "mun." Based on this, it could be suggested that the people originally referred to it as "mun" (for the reasons cited above), but the leaders tried to get them to start calling it "Lechem Abirim" instead. They weren't successful, and "Lechem Abirim" never caught on, and it was forever known as "mun." The Torah is telling us that despite the attempt to call it by a more respectable

name, the "House of Israel" still called it "mun," and that's the name that stuck. © 2010 Rabbi D. Kramer

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

GUEST SICHA BY RAV ELYAHIM KRUMBEIN SHLIT"A

Translated by Kaeren Fish

“**A**nd they believed in G-d" (Shemot 14:31). How did the nation achieve this state? And how are we to achieve this faith, which transcends the level of merely reciting slogans? One may affirm G-d's existence as a fact—either out of strongly-maintained tradition, or out of philosophical conviction. The author of Chovot Ha-levavot elaborates at length on both possibilities. However, the Rambam offers a third path.

The Rambam, who believed that the human epitome of knowledge of G-d was possible based on philosophical logic, also knew that only exceptional individuals would ultimately attain this level. However, he believed that there was also another way, which was not based upon the original acceptance of the forefathers, but rather anchored in the experience of the individual, even if he has not achieved the highest levels of theoretical understanding. This path is what he proposed to the students of his Mishneh Torah, a work intended also for those who are far removed from intellectual pursuits. As such, his suggestion remains a live option for our generation:

"What is the path to loving and fearing Him? When a person contemplates G-d's works and His great, wondrous creations, and stands in awe of His wisdom which is immeasurable and without bounds, he immediately loves and praises and glorifies [G-d] and feels a strong desire to know the great G-d, as David said, 'My soul thirsts for the Lord, for the living G-d.'

"And when he meditates upon these very things, he is taken aback and fearful and knows that he is a tiny, lowly, dark creature that stands with faint and little knowledge before He Who is perfect in wisdom, as David said: 'When I see Your heavens, the work of Your fingers—what is man that You should take note of him?'

"In accordance with these things I [shall] explain fundamental laws in the actions of the Sovereign of the worlds, in order that there shall be an opening for one who understands to love G-d, as our Sages taught concerning love—that out of this one comes to know Him Who spoke and the world came into being." (Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah 2:2)

In chapter 1, Rambam established the mitzva of knowledge of G-d and of His unity. But he did not ask here, "How does one go about knowing Him?"

Before explaining the path of knowing G-d, the Rambam waited until he had finished describing the personal significance of this knowledge: love and fear. Indeed, the Rambam is not talking about knowledge, or faith, in the objective, rational, abstract sense. I believe

that the term he uses for knowledge-"hakara"-means a personal, experiential sort of familiarity.

"And they believed in G-d and in Moshe, His servant." This is the climax of a process of inculcation of faith, which had been promised in advance: "And you shall know that I am the Lord Who brings you out from beneath the burdens of Egypt" (6:7). Could this possibly be talking about a rational conclusion drawn from the miracles of Egypt and the Red Sea? Is it more likely that this refers to proofs of G-d's existence, omnipotence and providence, or to an existential connection to their Redeemer?

It must be noted that first the text reads, "They feared G-d," and afterwards "they believed." This follows the same order set forth by the Rambam: first comes the experiential significance, and only afterwards is there recognition and knowing. So as to illustrate this point, the Torah juxtaposes the Song of the Sea to this faith in G-d, and we understand with certainty that this is not faith that has been arrived at through intellectual proofs alone. The direct result of their faith is that they burst into song.

In other words, faith results in meaning; without meaning it cannot survive. If faith does not infuse my life with meaning and does not cause me to sing, then it does not exist. A person cannot believe in G-d in the same way that he believes that the sun will rise tomorrow. There is no belief in G-d's existence without that existence influencing the life of the individual and giving it meaning.

What was the existential meaning that was the foundation for the faith of the generation that left Egypt?

Let us consider the example of Avraham, the first believer. Our Sages describe the beginnings of his faith by invoking the midrashic parable of the burning city. Some interpret the parable in the following way: Avraham saw a world going up in flames, the land controlled by evil people, and he concluded that there must be an "owner of the city" who will care enough to come and save the world. How is it possible to arrive at a cosmological conclusion based on a wish? Avraham identified within himself the inability to bear the situation, and analyzed this feeling: where did this human moral sense come from? Surely it could not have arisen from blind natural laws. It must be, he reasoned, that human morality is embedded in the world beyond, in the supernatural realm of the holy. There must be Someone Who is just, and He must have fashioned man with that aspiration. The existential significance of his faith gave rise to his trust. He had understood that G-d was the Supreme Source of the moral sensitivity which was so central to his life.

This was the axis upon which revolved the spiritual world of the generation that left Egypt. They lived in a world that was cynical and corrupt, which had built a culture on the foundations of oppression and infanticide. It is no wonder that their faith in justice was almost extinguished. But then Moshe arrived and

announced that G-d was going to fulfill His 400-year-old promise. This was difficult for them to believe, since the value of loyalty was entirely foreign to their concrete experience.

The crux of the "proof" embodied in the "strong arm" is not intellectual. Rather, it was the observation of how the natural world?

the Nile, the frogs, the locusts-all served Divine justice that gave rise to the understanding that there was Someone Who wanted to deliver the oppressed from the hand of the oppressor, and that the inner essence of the world is indeed good and upright. Moshe had to beg the people to take vessels of silver and gold-because Pharaoh, king of Egypt, owed them wages. To the slaves this sounded mad-and they responded with absolute disbelief. But the request had come not for the sake of the wealth, but rather for the sake of the awesome revelation that such a level of justice existed in the world.

When our forefathers were struck with astonishment at the Sea, this resulted in faith. In other words, those who had been redeemed permitted themselves to revive what had been almost completely vanquished during their long years of slavery. They were guided by their inner senses and found there confirmation (intuitive and unproven!) that the Splitting of the Sea was not a one-time event, but rather the reflection of something fundamental and integral to the world, and to themselves as people. From now on, man's loftiest aspirations were no longer an illusion; goodness was no longer condemned to be shattered on the rocks of cynicism; the conduct of the world ultimately had to make sense. This could be demanded of man. It could be expected of G-d.

Great faith means a great song. If the Rambam's vision doesn't affect us, perhaps we are reading the words without singing the notes. Our wonderment is locked up inside the routine view that attributes everything to human rule. If we sit down and write just some of the important, precious and essential things in our lives over which we have no control, and which-for all our effect on them-could just as easily not have come into existence, perhaps we can begin to touch the outermost edges of the greatness of the world in which, amazingly enough, we awaken and find ourselves. Perhaps we can still awaken the wonderment, and perhaps the song will awaken on its own, and we shall merit to come to know Him Who spoke and the world came into being.

RABBI YISROEL CINER

Parsha Insights

This week we read the parsha of B'shalach. After two hundred and ten years of arduous slavery, Bnei Yisroel {the Children of Israel} left Mitzrayim {Egypt}. Paroah, faithful to the pattern he exhibited during the plagues of vacillating between submission to

Hashem and rebellion against Him, decided to pursue Bnei Yisroel and attempt to bring them back after he had willingly sent them out.

"Mitzrayim chased after them and caught up with them camped by the sea. [14:9]" Following Hashem's instructions, Moshe extended his hand over the sea, causing it to split. Bnei Yisroel then proceeded to cross what had been the sea, on dry land. In a final fit of blind insanity, the Egyptians chased after Bnei Yisroel into the heart of the split sea. Not for long. As the last Jew left the sea and the last Egyptian entered, Hashem instructed Moshe to again extend his hand over the sea, sending the waters back to their natural course. With the subsequent death of the entire Egyptian army, Bnei Yisroel were finally and irreversibly freed from the slavery of Mitzrayim.

"Az yashir Moshe uBnei Yisroel... {Then, Moshe and Bnei Yisroel sang...}[15:1]" At that point, a song of praise was sung to Hashem. Let's try to understand this slavery and the song that it ultimately led to.

Most of us are familiar with the term "mazel tov" that is extended at happy occasions. It is usually and inaccurately defined as either congratulations or good luck. In fact, the words "mazel tov" refer to one of the deepest concepts involving the way that Hashem runs this world. It was this that left Moshe wondering why the righteous sometimes suffer even while evil prospers.

[The following is based on the Sifsei Chaim.] The word mazel means to flow. The messengers through which the directives given by Hashem flow down to this world are the seven mazels. These, also known as the constellations, are comprised of the sun, moon and five stars [see Rashi on Shabbos 156A]. They don't determine anything on their own but rather serve as the pipelines through which Hashem's will flows and is implemented.

The two main basis's upon which Hashem decides what will be sent down to each person on this earth are "mishpat-judgment" and "mazel-flow." Mishpat comes about as a heavenly reaction and response to our actions. That is what we expect from Hashem. Mazel, on the other hand, refers to that which flows down regardless of one's actions.

Every neshama {soul} is sent down to this world to fulfill its unique role in giluy haYichud {the revelation of Hashem's Oneness}. This had been the mission set before Adam HaRishon {Adam, the first man}. When he failed to bring this about on his own, his collective neshama {soul} and its mission was divided amongst all of the souls throughout all the generations until Moshiach {Messiah}. In order for this jigsaw puzzle to be complete, each piece, each neshama, has to fulfill its role.

The root of each neshama-which part of Adam HaRishon it comprised-determines its unique role in the giluy haYichud. Some souls have the assignment to bring about this giluy haYichud while living comfortably, remembering to focus on Hashem and not their

luxuries. Others are assigned to bring about giluy haYichud while living lives of difficulties and hardships, accepting their lot and still loving Hashem.

We could say that mazel is the cards we are dealt. We then choose how to play our hand. Any further cards that are dealt are either based on how you played that first hand (what we referred to as "mishpat"), further mazel or a combination of the two.

In the words of the Talmud [Niddah 16B]: "The angel in charge of pregnancy stands before Hashem and asks: What will be with this child? Strong or weak? Clever or slow? Rich or poor? However, righteous or evil is not predetermined. That is in the hands of the individual-not heaven."

Accordingly, the prophet Yirmiyahu [9:22-23] taught: "Let the wise man not glory in his wisdom, let the powerful man not be praised for his strength, let the rich not glory in their riches. Rather, he that glories should only glory in this, that he understands and knows Me (Hashem)."

The wisdom, strength and wealth are predetermined, unearned and undeserving of praise. How one chooses to use those things is all a person really "owns." With that we have an understanding in "mazel tov." At critical junctures in a person's life-births, circumcisions, bar/bat mitzvahs, and weddings-we wish them to be granted pleasant circumstances within which they will be charged with serving Hashem. We wish them to have a "good flow."

Let us now return to our parsha. A heavenly decree required that Israel suffer through slavery in order to build a nation worthy of receiving the Torah. It wasn't the actions of individuals that brought this heavenly response of slavery. It wasn't mishpat-it was mazel. Long and tortuous mazel. It was incredibly difficult to accept and comprehend. Even Moshe challenged Hashem asking Him why He brought such evil onto the nation [5:22].

All the creations of the entire universe sing the praises of Hashem, accepting all that flows down to it. Mankind, standing at the apex of that creation, the lone creation that has free will, has difficulty joining in that song. Bad things happen to good people. The world can be a very tough place. It's hard to sing sometimes?

"Az yashir Moshe uBnei Yisroel... {Then, Moshe and Bnei Yisroel sang...} [15:1]" Az... Then... Az is spelled "aleph", "zayin." The numerical value of "aleph" is one and of "zayin" is seven. At last, Bnei Yisroel understood and believed with perfect clarity that One (Hashem) stands above in absolute control of the seven mazels (constellations)[Kli Yakar] and that even that which seems to make no sense is the loving flow directed by Hashem. When they were able to fully appreciate this giluy haYichud that could only have been brought out through the tortuous ordeal they had endured, then mankind finally joined in that praise-song to Hashem sung by the entire universe. © 2010 Rabbi Y. Ciner & Project Genesis, Inc.